

The second Sunday of Epiphany

A reflection on Isaiah 62:1-5 & John 2:1-11

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Weddings are wonderful occasions, but the day's events rarely work out entirely as intended. I speak from some experience. I recall some years ago conducting a wedding in a country church after days of torrential rain. The plan was for the bride to make the journey to the ceremony from her home in a horse-drawn carriage. On the day, all seemed to be going well until, half way up a steep hill in a country lane, the pair of horses refused point-blank to take one step further, leaving the bride to make a tricky descent from the carriage into a narrow road running in water, and to await a rescue car to complete the journey.

Meanwhile, unaware of this unfolding drama, and as I waited at the church door to welcome the bridal party, the visiting professional organist tapped me on the shoulder to tell me the organ had ceased to function.

Amazingly, the bride managed to complete her journey without so much as a spot of mud on her wedding dress, and the day was saved by the best man. He happened to be an electrical engineer, quickly spotting that a circuit in the organ had tripped out, and so ensuring that I wouldn't have to lead unaccompanied singing.

So as we reflect on the event described in our gospel reading, the wedding at Cana, we may feel we're on familiar ground. Familiar, because this will have been referred to at every wedding we've attended in church. The introduction to the service speaks of marriage "blessed by the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ with those celebrating a wedding at Cana in Galilee". The old

Prayer Book service added that the occasion witnessed the “first miracle that [Jesus] wrought”.

But John’s account also turns on one of those moments when it all goes horribly wrong. The wine at the wedding celebration had run out, and Jesus saved the day by the miracle of turning water into wine.

It’s a lovely story, but we might be forgiven for thinking that, at first sight, there was something odd about it. It’s true that the wedding celebration would have been an important event in the life of the community of Cana. Held by tradition at the bridegroom’s home, it would have gone on for no less than seven days, and the whole village may well have been invited. And of course Jesus’s mother was there – she’s not named, and appears on only one other occasion in John’s gospel – and Jesus and his disciples were guests as well.

When we think of Jesus’s miracles, we think of him meeting a deep human need – hunger, health, or even life itself - with miraculous provision. But this wasn’t feeding 5000 desperately hungry people with five barley loaves and two small fish, or the healing of ten lepers, or indeed raising from death his friend Lazarus. So what’s the need here?

It’s true that running out of wine at a wedding celebration would have been seen not as a social embarrassment – more a social disgrace which may have taken years to live down. But the family wasn’t poor; they had servants and could afford expensive stone water jars used for ritual purification. No-one’s life was at stake here; wasn’t this is a case of re-fuelling revellers who may well already have had enough to drink? So by any yardstick “luxury” and “extravagance” are the words that spring to mind.

Perhaps we should hold that last thought in mind as we ask ourselves the question: surely there must be more to the story than this? One thing we can be sure of as we read John's gospel is that it consists of layers of meaning that need to be carefully peeled back.

At the end of the story, we're told that by changing water into wine at Cana of Galilee, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus revealed his glory. John tells us elsewhere that Jesus did plenty of other signs, many of which weren't recorded (20:30), but John carefully chose this one, the wedding at Cana as the first. But the Greek word used here for "first" doesn't just mean the first in time, but the first in power. It's the key to all the other signs that are to follow.

A sign is meant to point to something beyond itself – and in this case to a wider truth and a deeper significance. To appreciate what that is, we need to go back to the beginning of the story. We're told that this wedding took place "on the third day." That's a phrase we know well. And it's an unnecessary note of timing – unless it points ahead to the ultimate moment of Jesus's glory, the resurrection itself. The third day is the day of life through death. So there's something about this wedding, this wine, that speaks of resurrection, of new creation, of new beginnings, new hope.

We had a hint of this in the Old Testament reading. Isaiah speaks of God's new age where God rejoices over his people like a bridegroom rejoicing over his bride. And the prophet Joel looks to the same time when "the vats will overflow with new wine" (2:24). So perhaps, as we said earlier, this is, after all, all about God's lavish provision, God's generous overflowing love, the glory of heaven, as the hymn writer puts it, filling the earth as the waters cover the sea.

So what about us? Where and how do our lives relate to what Jesus did that day at Cana of Galilee. I want to suggest three things.

First, Jesus engages with situations of emptiness. Jesus's mother said to him "They have no more wine". We might look around us and see a society where there is often an aching emptiness, a lack – a lack of truth, of love, of hope, of spiritual nourishment. We have a saying that in a way is quite appropriate: the honeymoon's over. I suppose we hear it most often about our elected leaders and other public figures, but I suspect we've all known it in our lives, or those of our friends and loved ones, in one way or another. The friendship is true, but misunderstandings are putting stresses on it; it's not what it was. Faith was sustaining when things were going well, but when this problem struck, when that difficulty emerged, things turned a bit sour. Hope was easy to talk about to someone else who was in despair, but when it was me, the wine ran out.

So, secondly, Jesus enters and engages with lives and situations of emptiness, with the power to transform in ways we can scarcely imagine. We're told in Matthew's gospel that Jesus's last promise to his friends was "I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." That promise is still as real and sure today. So we have the reassurance that not only is he with us, but offers us protection, guidance and care and help in the most practical of ways. He acts in the everyday situations of life – in giving patience when it may be running out; in pouring in love when it may be in short supply and in providing strength when it's been spent. In giving a new dimension to joy and celebration.

Jesus said that he had come to give life, and life in all its abundance (10:10). He puts the resources and qualities of the living God at our disposal. And Jesus provides the best. You'll be familiar with the kind of offer I had recently. As we converted to fast fibre broadband, we were offered different levels of performance – the more we were willing to pay the greater the performance.

But Jesus doesn't work like that. He offers us the greatest care at no charge, and with no strings attached.

Remember that, when the wine ran out, Jesus didn't organise the supply of a few bottles of house red. He changed about 150 gallons of water into 800 bottles worth of the vintage product, the Chateau La Fitte Rothschild of 1st century Israel. So we're reminded that in offering us the opportunity of lives transformed, Jesus wants the very best for us. Though we may have known hurt or disappointment or brokenness, growth and fulfilment can spring from them. Jesus went to extraordinary lengths to make this offer. It's a free offer, but it's not cheap. It cost Jesus his life on the Cross, for love of us.

Thirdly, Jesus's offer isn't only the transformation of our lives, but of the way we relate to others. He wants us to experience his love in every aspect of our lives, and to share it with others. Jesus performed the miracle at Cana, and turned the water into wine. But remember there was an important part for the servants. Jesus said "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.....now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." If they hadn't done that, if they hadn't taken seriously the words of Jesus's mother – "Do whatever he tells you" - then the miracle, the transformation wouldn't have been complete. The water was turned into wine because the servants co-operated with Jesus and obeyed his command. We are those servants; called to do whatever he tells us. That might mean asking ourselves how the church can work with God to bring that "new wine" to a society so thirsty for it. And what will that "new wine" look like?

So there's much more to this gospel story than meets the eye. It's about emptiness, it's about Jesus's power to transform and it's about our calling to be agents of that transformation. It's a story of love and laughter and weddings

and wine and new life in all its rich variety. Jesus never forces his presence on anyone. But the invitation is always there, and it's this: would you and I like our life to be changed from water into wine? If we do, we might just find that God has kept the best wine until now.